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CHOISEUL AND THE HISTORY OF FRANCE

Emma Rothschild

The English countryside is a second, unlikely exile for Choiseul and his box. Étienne-François de Choiseul-Stainville was the leading political figure of France from 1758, when he became minister of foreign affairs, and later of war, the navy and the colonies, to Christmas Eve of 1770, when he was exiled in disgrace to his country house of Chanteloup in Touraine. He was identified, over these twelve wartime and inter-war years, as the most anti-English of all French statesmen. He was deeply involved, in the months before his fall, in "Naval Preparations making in all the Dockyards."¹ He was also involved in elaborate plans for a surprise invasion of England, including a secret intelligence mission to Nettlebed and the Dorchester bridge over the River Thames, together with a detailed coloured map of the anticipated "Battle of Wimbleden," in advance of the "submission of London."² His disgrace was widely attributed, at the time, to the victory of the "pacific" party associated with Louis XV's favourite of the time, the Comtesse du Barry. The British Ambassador in Paris was so excited that he sent the news to London with his own "Valet de Chambre, as I thought it incumbent upon me, at this critical moment, to communicate to your Lordship with all imaginable speed."³

Choiseul has been seen, ever since, as a transient and unsuccessful figure in the history of eighteenth-century France. He was "very light," a "little bulldog," Jules Michelet wrote in his *Histoire de France*, "vanquished in finances, vanquished on land and at sea;" "what did he cost us? nothing more than the world."⁴ His only "honour," for Michelet and for subsequent historians, was as a patron of political, artistic and philosophical culture; "he had the singular good fortune to find himself [in office] at the very moment of the most admirable reawakening of enlightenment and humanity."⁵ Choiseul was the epitome, in this sense, of the late *ancien régime*, as it has been depicted in so many histories of France; a light and evanescent world, of which the

only enduring importance was to be "pre-revolutionary," and the only monuments were philosophical ideas.

Choiseul's own fortunes were evanescent enough. The domain of Chanteloup, which he bought in 1761, had been consolidated in 1708 by the French secretary of a Spanish-French-Italian princess.⁶ It was inherited by the secretary's son-in-law, and was rented out from time to time; most notably to the English statesman Henry St John Bolingbroke, whose *Letters on History*, with their evocation of the "inward strength" of France, and of the smallness of historians ("makers of Dictionaries!" or those "who make fair copies of foul manuscripts"), are dated "Chantelou in Touraine, Nov. 6, 1735."⁷ Choiseul and his wife, Louise Honorine Crozat du Châtel, owned the domain from 1761 to 1786, and lived there from 1770 to 1774. It was sold, in 1786, to the Duc de Penthièvre, the grandson of Louis XIV (and the grandfather of Louis Philippe.)

Chanteloup was sold again, in 1798, to a naval officer, and then, in 1802, to Jean-Antoine Chaptal, later known as Chaptal de Chanteloup, the Minister of the Interior of Napoleon. Chaptal made Chanteloup into a "vast manufacture for sugar beet"; the patriotic turnip which was supposed to emancipate the French from the despotism of naval power and English colonial sugar.⁸ But Chaptal, too, was obliged to sell the estate, and it fell into the hands, after 1822, of a "bande noire" of speculators in the debris of the ancien régime and the revolution. As in the domain of Les Aigues, in Balzac's novel *Les Paysans*, the mysterious woods and the avenues of the park had become no more, within a few years, than the likeness of a "tailor's card of samples."⁹

Even Choiseul's collections were transient; portable and disposable. There were the two celebrated gold boxes, of a size to fit in a man's pocket, with their illustrations of the avenues of Chanteloup and of Choiseul's paintings in Paris; pictures of pictures.¹⁰ There were the catalogues, which were themselves celebrated for their "petitesse." The duchesse de Choiseul was the grand-

daughter of the financier Antoine Crozat, and the great-niece of the financier Pierre Crozat, the sponsor of the first spectacular catalogue of collections, including a part of his collection of 19,201 drawings, the *Receuil Crozat*.¹¹ Choiseul's own catalogue of 1771 to 1772, the *Receuil d'estampes gravées*, was described by the engraver Basan as an experiment in a "format portatif," and in a "forme dont la petitesse n'empêchat pas de reconnoître l'excellence des Maitres." It was an invitation to memory ("to be consulted whenever one wishes to recall to one's imagination the pleasure and the beauties of the originals") and an invitation to a sale.¹² The auction catalogue of Choiseul's paintings, which were sold in his house in Paris in April 1772, was the complement of the *Receuil*. The Comtesse du Barry, Choiseul's playful nemesis (and the childhood friend of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard), was able to buy only one or two of the twelve paintings she wanted, including the Greuze portrait of a girl with a black dog; she also bought a copy of the *Recueil* (which cost her 101 livres, or rather more than the remuneration of the seven men who brought her the painting.)¹³

Choiseul can be seen, in all these respects, as the transitory figure of Michelet's *Histoire*; the philosopher-statesman who lost the world. But he is also an underestimated figure, in a different and more sombre history. For Choiseul's legerity was itself, in part, an imposture. He went to great lengths to explain his insouciance ("in my ministry, I have always made people work more than I have worked myself... it is important to make the people who work, work"), but had himself painted with state papers and drawings of naval vessels.¹⁴ His twelve years in power have been identified as a period of extensive reform in the French army, the foundation of the efficient modern armies of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars; of transformation in the French colonial administration; and of the naval rearmament and reorganization which made possible the spectacular French success in the American War of Independence, or the victory over the English of 1783.¹⁵ The depiction of Chanteloup by Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, who was himself the "peintre de batailles" of the French army, or of forage procurement and sieges,

was distinctively military, like a great battlefield; the Great Gallery of the Louvre, painted by Blarenberghe on Choiseul's other box, was a repository of "relief maps, models of fortresses and fortified towns."¹⁶ Another British ambassador reported to London, in 1775, that Choiseul was "bored to death" in Chanteloup, in spite of "his great state, and his interest in agriculture."¹⁷

Even the transience of Choiseul's possessions is an interesting illustration of the economic circumstances of the times. The French economy of the late *ancien régime* has been reinterpreted, by recent historians -- much as it was by the English observers of the time, from Lord Bolingbroke, in Chanteloup in 1735, to Arthur Young and Edmund Burke in the 1780s -- as a prosperous and expanding society of local, national, and transnational markets. It was a world of innovation in credit, in the flourishing economy of printing and publishing, and in commerce with the American colonies and the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ Choiseul's own mobility, in social and economic condition, is an instance of this fluctuating scene. His father was the orphaned and almost destitute child of a naval officer from a family of minor nobility in Lorraine, who had become governor of the French colony of Saint-Domingue (the modern Haiti), and was buried in Cuba.¹⁹ Choiseul's fortune was the outcome, like his father's, of prudent marriage; Louise-Honorine de Choiseul's grand-father and great-uncle, the sons of a merchant in Toulouse, were more spectacularly mobile.²⁰ The exchangeability of their property -- the drawings, prints, snuff-boxes and catalogues -- was itself a sign of the economic changes of the times. There has never really been a Namier of eighteenth-century France, or a prosopography of the political, financial and military contracting interests of public life in France in the age of the American Revolution. Choiseul's family, like Pitt's, could be at the centre of such a history.

The Choiseuls and the Crozats would be a fascinating illustration, too, of the extent to which the expanding economy of eighteenth-century France was dependent on colonial and overseas exchanges. Joseph Vernet's series of fifteen vast paintings, *Les Ports de France*, which was executed for Louis XV in the course of an extended journey in 1755 to 1761, from Antibes to

Bordeaux, Rochefort, and Dieppe, was the depiction of this opulent scene.²¹ So too were the vistas of interior exchanges that Vernet painted after Choiseul's disgrace: the construction of a great road, in a mountainous inland province, and the approach to a commercial fair; people and things, making their way to the sea.²² The Crozats had made their fortunes, half a century earlier, in a dizzying sequence of overseas ventures: the expeditions of the Compagnie des Indes to the Bay of Bengal; the Asiento, or the right to supply the Spanish Empire in the Americas with African slaves; the company of Saint-Domingue; the Louisiana company; the Levantine trade.²³ The Choiseuls, too, were deeply involved, throughout the century, in the plantation economy of Saint-Domingue, and in its political institutions.²⁴ There was a slaving vessel called "Comtesse de Choiseul," for Choiseul's grandmother, in Martinique in 1710, and a slaving vessel called "Duc de Choiseul," in 1775 in Dunkirk.²⁵

In the most elaborate of all Choiseul's plans, in 1763-1765, he and his cousin and eventual successor as Minister of the Navy and Colonies, the duc de Choiseul-Praslin, were to be the viceroys, or feudal sovereigns, of a new French Massachusetts, in South America.²⁶ The project of the colonisation of Cayenne was eventually a "plain of tombs," and "a chasm of expense."²⁷ But the Choiseuls were engaged, in the process, in the minutest details of a slave economy. In the description of Brûletout de Préfontaine, whom Choiseul chose as the first colonist to settle the new province, and whose *Maison rustique, à l'usage des habitants de Cayenne*, with its almost Chanteloup-like drawings of semi-military plantations, was dedicated to Choiseul, Cayenne was a universe of unending fear and unending war: "One should be firm, without being hard. It is useful to maintain one's sang-froid, and to note the effect that the punishment produces in the spectators. If there are protests, it is important to give no sign of paying attention, and to redouble one's firmness."²⁸

Choiseul, in this more sombre history, was a less unsuccessful figure. France's military and naval revenge was accompanied, in the 1780s, by an expansion in French manufacturing and

overseas commerce. There were more slaves imported into Saint-Domingue, in each of the six years from 1785 to 1790, than into mainland North America and all of the British Caribbean combined. The apogee or nadir of the entire eighteenth century, in the sense of the largest number of slaves shipped across the Atlantic in a single year in the vessels of a single European flag, was French; 54,403 slaves, in 161 voyages of French vessels, in the revolutionary year of 1790.²⁹ It was George III, more than Choiseul, who "lost the world" (or who lost America); it was Toussaint-Louverture, or Napoleon, who "lost" the French Atlantic.

The consequences of Choiseul's power can be found, even, in the post-revolutionary world of the nineteenth century and in the lives of the officials whom he protected. Pierre-Victor Malouet, who was the most officious of clerks in the expedition to Cayenne, was minister of the navy and of colonies at the restoration of Louis XVIII; Alexandre d'Hauterive, whom Choiseul instructed in Chanteloup on working and being worked for, was in charge of the archives of the Foreign Ministry; there were colonial administrators of Saint-Domingue re-employed in Algeria. The enmity with England evolved, in the course of the nineteenth century, into a war of words, within two prosperous societies; a competition in formal and informal empire.³⁰ The Vale of Aylesbury, where one of Choiseul's other enemies settled in exile as Louis XVIII, and where Waddesdon Manor stands, was itself, by the end of the century, an imaginary France; a little valley of the Loire.³¹

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Notes

¹ Letter of December 12 1770 from Lord Harcourt, the British Ambassador in Paris, to Lord Rochford, in London, The National Archives (TNA), SP/78/281, f. 238r.

² "Mémoires militaires faits par ordre du Ministre (le Duc de Choiseul) par M. Grant de Blairfindy, Colonel des troupes legeres -- années 1767 et 1768," [sic], part 1, p. 7 and plan facing p. 87, in TNA PRO 30/8/86 (Chatham Papers); "Instructions pour le comte de Bévill Lt. colonel de dragons... fait à Compiègne le 19 Aout 1768 signé Le Duc de Choiseul," part 3; "Reconnaissance faite en Angleterre aux mois de Septbre. à Octbre. 1768," part 4, p. 94; Bévill's marked up copy of extracts from Grant's memoir, with comments on the "plains of Wimbleton," presented to Choiseul on April 7 1770, part 7.

³ Letter of December 24 1770 from Lord Harcourt to Lord Rochford, TNA, SP/78/281, f. 266r. On the "pacific" views of Louis XV, and the accusation against Choiseul that in the "critical conjuncture between England and Spain" in December 1770, he "was seeking silently to bring about war," see [Pidansat de Mairobert], *Anecdotes sur Mme. La Comtesse Du Barri* (London, 1775), p. 165.

⁴ "Enclosed henceforth, losing both her East and her West Indies, banished from America and from Asia, France saw the Englishman occupying at his ease the five parts of the globe." Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France au dix huitième siècle: Louis XV et Louis XVI* (Paris, 1867), pp. v, 15, 26.

⁵ Michelet, *Histoire de France au dix huitième siècle*, pp. 132-133.

⁶ Véronique Moreau and Sophie Join-Lambert, "Introduction historique," in *Chanteloup: Un moment de grâce autour du duc de Choiseul*, ed. Véronique Moreau (Tours, 2007), pp. 17-20.

⁷ Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (London, 1752), 2 vols., vol. 1, pp. 1, 4, 5, vol. 2, p. 123.

⁸ Hermann Pückler-Muskau, *Chroniques, lettres et journal de voyage, extraits des papiers d'un défunt* (Paris, 1836-1837), 5 vols., vol. 2, p. 49; and see Monique Poulot-Moreau, "La science appliquée: le sucre de betterave," in *Chaptal*, ed. Michel Péronnet (Toulouse, 1988), pp. 219-229.

⁹ H. de Balzac, *Les Paysans Scènes de la Vie de Campagne* (Paris, 1865), pp. 187-188.

¹⁰ See F.J.B. Watson, *The Choiseul Box* (London, 1963); F.J.B. Watson, "Snuff Box," in *The Wrightsman collection*, vol. 3, ed. F.J.B. Watson and Carl Christian Dauterman (New York, 1970), pp. 133-139.

¹¹ Cordélia Hattori, "The drawings collection of Pierre Crozat (1665-1740)," in *Collecting Prints and Drawings in Europe, c. 1500-1750*, ed. Christopher Baker, Caroline Elam and Genevieve Warwick (London, 2003), 173-181, p. 173; Benedict Leca, "An Art Book and its Viewers: The 'Receuil Crozat' and the Uses of Reproductive Engraving," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2005), 623-649.

¹² Basan, Preface, unpag., in F. Basan, *Recueil d'estampes gravées d'après les tableaux du cabinet de Monseigneur le duc de Choiseul* (Paris, 1771).

¹³ J. F. Boileau, *Catalogue des tableaux qui composent le cabinet de monseigneur de duc de Choiseul, dont la Vente se sera le Lundi 6 Avril 1772, de relevée, & jours suivans, en son Hôtel, rue de Richelieu* (Paris, 1772). The copy of the catalogue in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Typ 715.72.225, is the one that Boileau sent to the comtesse Du Barry, and is annotated in hand. Three manuscript documents are folded into the volume, a list of ten of the paintings, a cover note to Boileau from the Marquis d'Arcambal, on behalf of the comtesse, and an invoice for the costs of transport, the purchase of a copy of the Basan *Recueil*, and the auction commission. On the

comtesse du Barry's early life in the household of Adélaïde Labille-Guiard's parents, see *Anecdotes sur Mme. La Comtesse Du Barri*, pp. 14-37.

¹⁴ Account by Alexandre d'Hauterive of a conversation while walking in Chanteloup in 1784 with Choiseul and Gérard de Rayneval, in Artaud de Montor, *Histoire de la vie et des travaux politiques du comte d'Hauterive* (Paris, 1839), pp. 16-17; Louis-Michel Van Loo, Étienne-François de Choiseul-Stainville, duc de Choiseul (1763), in Xavier Salmon, "L'image de soi. Portraits du clan Choiseul," in *Chanteloup: Un moment de grâce*, pp. 200-201.

¹⁵ André Corvisier, *L'armée française de la fin du XVII^e siècle au ministère de Choiseul: Le soldat* (Paris, 1964); Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'ancien régime: L'évolution du régime de l'Exclusif de 1763 à 1789* (Paris, 1972), 2 vols.; Martine Acerra, *Rocheport et la construction navale française, 1661-1815* (Paris, 1993), 4 vols; and see Isabelle and Robert Tombs, *That sweet enemy: the French and the British from the Sun King to the present* (London, 2006), chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁶ Watson, *op.cit.*, p. 17; Watson, "Snuff Box." On Blarenberghe as a painter of forage provisioning and the siege of Yorktown, see *Les Van Blarenberghe: des reporters du XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Jean-François Méjanès (Paris, 2006), and Xavier Salmon, *Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe à Versailles: les gouaches commandées par Louis XVI* (Paris, 2005).

¹⁷ Choiseul had recently arrived in Paris, "which you may be assured gave me some alarm." Letter of October 4 1775 from Mr St. Paul to Lord Rochford, TNA, SP/78/297, f. 10r.

¹⁸ On the French economy and overseas commerce, see François Crouzet, *La guerre économique franco-anglaise au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 2008) and Guillaume Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: la France au XVIII^e siècle*, intr. François Crouzet (Paris, 2005). On the business of publishing, see Robert Darnton, *The business of enlightenment: a publishing history of the 'Encyclopédie', 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), and Robert Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (London, 1996). On the revisionist history of French economic growth, see François Crouzet, "Angleterre et France au XVIII^e siècle: essai d'analyse comparée de deux croissances économiques," *Annales ESC*, vol. 21, no. 2 (March-April 1966), pp. 254-291, Jean-Pierre Poussou, "Le dynamisme de l'économie française sous Louis XVI," *Revue économique*, vol. 40, no. 6 (November 1989), pp. 965-984, and Philip T. Hoffman and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, "New Work in French Economic History," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2000), pp. 439-453.

¹⁹ Rohan Butler, *Choiseul Father and Son 1719-1754* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 10-17. Choiseul's paternal grandmother died in Saint-Domingue, and his grandfather died in a naval battle with the British, and was buried in Cuba.

²⁰ On the origins of Antoine and Pierre Crozat, see Claude-Frédéric Lévy, *Capitalistes et Pouvoir au siècle des lumières* (Paris, 1969), 3 vols.

²¹ Musée de la Marine, Paris, and see <http://www.musee-marine.fr/public/virtuel/vernet/index.html>.

²² "Aux abords d'une foire" is in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier; "La construction d'un grand chemin" is in the Louvre, Inv. 8831. The two paintings are reproduced as Plate CXIII, 247 and 248, in Florence Ingersoll-Smousse, *Joseph Vernet Peintre de Marine 1714-1789* (Paris, 1926), vol. 2. The paintings were commissioned in 1774 by the controller-general of the time, the abbé Terray, who was another of Choiseul's enemies. They were a depiction of the economic regulation, the "corvée" for road construction and the orderly policing of fairs and markets, that Terray's successor A.R.J. Turgot, and even Choiseul himself, so disdained; a high official's eye view of economic life in the interior of the empire, in much the same sense as the *Ports de France* were the king's inspector's eye view of the empire's exterior.

²³ Lévy, *Capitalistes et Pouvoir*, and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1970).

²⁴ Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial*, vol. 1, pp. 313-314.

²⁵ The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, available at <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.

²⁶ E. Daubigny, *Choiseul et la France d'outre-mer après le traité de Paris; étude sur la politique coloniale au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1892), p. 39.

²⁷ Letter of March 27 1767 from Daniel-Marc-Antoine Chardon to Voltaire, in *Voltaire's Correspondence*, ed. Theodore Besterman, (Geneva, 1963) 135 vols., vol. 65, p. 89, and see Emma Rothschild, "A Horrible Tragedy in the French Atlantic," *Past and Present*, no. 192 (August 2006), pp. 67-108.

²⁸ Brûletout de Préfontaine, *Maison rustique, à l'usage des habitants de la partie de la France équinoxiale, connue sous le nom de Cayenne* (Paris, 1763), pp. 102, 104.

²⁹ The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.

³⁰ David Todd, *L'identité économique de la France: Libre-échange et protectionnisme, 1814-1851* (Paris, 2008); David Todd, "A French Imperial Meridian" (Centre for History and Economics, 2009.)

³¹ On Choiseul's dispute with the Comte de Provence, later Louis XVIII, over the sinecure of the colonelcy of the Swiss Guards, see *Mémoires du duc de Choiseul : 1719-1785*, ed. Fernand Calmettes (Paris, 1904), pp. 283, 346, 361. On Louis XVIII's exile at Hartwell House, see *Lettres d'Artwell: correspondance politique et privée de Louis XVIII, Roi de France* (Paris, 1830).